DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 158 457 EC 111 830

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TITLE A Counselor-Based Work-Study Program for Educable Mentally Retarded Youth.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Future Special Education (First, Stirling, Scotland, June 25 - July 1, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Counseling Services; *Counselor Role; Delivery Systems; *Educable Mentally Handicapped; Elementary Education; Mentally Handicapped; *Program Descriptions; Public Schools

ABSTRACT

The paper describes a public school delivery system which provides counseling for educable mentally retarded students (pre-primer through sixth grade). The system is noted to incorporate the following guidelines: (1) exceptional students have the same counseling needs as "normal" students, but their disabilities create special needs of which educators must be aware; (2) the counselor has a special function to help the educable mental retardate find his competencies and to help him move toward developing his full potential; (3) the counselor must establish a warm and human relationship; and (4) the counselor should also reach into the community to help spread the idea that educable mental retardates can become productive citizens. (Author/SBH)

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A Counselor-based Work-study Program for Educable Mentally Retarded Youths

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Running head: Counselor-based Work-study for Educable Mental Retardates

EC 111830

Abstract

Exceptional students have the same counseling needs as so-called "normal" students, but their disabilities create special needs of which educators must be aware. The counselor has a special function to help the educable mental retardate find his competencies and to help him move toward developing his full potential. He/she must first of all establish a warm and human relationship. He/she should also reach into the community to help spread the idea that educable mental retardates can become productive citizens. This paper describes a public school delivery system incorporating these guidelines.

I work as guidance counselor and work coordinator at Truxtun Secondary Education Center, part of the Portsmouth, Virginia, City School System. The school educates students aged 14 to 21 whose intelligence quotients as measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children fall between scores 50 to 70 and whose reading level ranges from pre-primer to 6th grade.

In working with my students, hereafter referred to as "EMR's," I have found that they fall into 4 categories with much overlapping. They are: students who have not learned to learn because of the extremely low socio-economic background from which they come, those who have learning problems such as visual perceptual abnormalities, those who have emotional disturbances resulting from traumatic family situations, and lastly, the brain damaged. Although students in the first 3 categories measure low on the WISC and are placed educationally in the retarded category, in working with them one finds much more potential for development than one ordinarily expects with mentally retarded individuals. It is necessary to counsel and guide each student individually and not categorize or discount students as being incapacitated. In my work over the past years I have learned: First, as I have mentioned, they are capable of a great deal more learning than most people, including many educators - think. Secondly, it takes time to build relationships. It is only by showing respect for the student and his parents day in and day out over the three years that they are in the Center, that a good trustful relationship is built. By going

out into the halls, into the classrooms and cafeteria and doing what in the '50's came to be called "gazebo" counseling, a counselor can accomplish the building of that understanding and caring relationship that is so meaningful. It is through the relationship of caring and trust that all counseling and guidance is done.

In our school which has about 170 students, the staff knows the name of every child and knows his family and its problems. These students respond to a show of interest more than so-called "normal" students, I believe, because they have received so many "put-downs" instead of "pull-ups" in their lives. They have endured being called "retarded" even by their own siblings at times. I find it helpful to get to know the parents and to discuss with them the relationships among the children in the family. Often parents have not realized the crushing blow to self-confidence that occurs when a younger sibling surpasses the retarded child in grade level. When the family member realizes that somebody is truly interested in helping, he develops a trust that aids in building the school relationship with the child. In working with special students, I believe that the main goal of the counselor must be to help them to become productive citizens. This necessitates motivating them to want to work and to develop characteristics that will make them employable. It also requires a gradual build-up of successful model "graduates" from the program.

When the student enters our school he is 14. From the time he enters until he is placed in the work training program at age 16, my main endeavor is to help the student reach the point of

maturity in attitude needed for work training. I counsel closely with those students who are most immature - usually individually - trying to find their strong points of interest and ability. I build conversations around experiences in which the student has had success. I also go into classrooms and lead group discussion about the work program that they will be entering and tell them about the students who are in the program. Work training students sometimes take part in the group to answer questions. We begin early to discuss and visit various job locations discussing the qualifications needed in order that later the student will understand which jobs he will be able to hold successfully. Much of my work involves contacting local businesses and city and federal departments to seek employers who will train students. Although the training is sponsored by the Virginia Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, the training is supervised directly by the employer. I act as counselor to the student during his training and cooperate closely with the employer in helping the student in job adjustment. The work training extends for 8 months during which time the student alternates a week of school with a week of work. During the weeks in school the classroom teacher relates the academic work with the particular job the student holds. The students are trained as carpenters, painters, hospital housekeepers, groundskeepers, custodians, dry cleaners, office workers, chemistry lab helpers, stock room workers, and grocery baggers. After the training is complete, the student is aided in finding full-time employment and is kept on the school roll until he graduates.

In working with EMR's I give every opportunity for them to have "hands on" learning in actual work situations as a step toward

their being able to support themselves. In addition to this, it is important to remember that EMR's have a large void in their general knowledge. While "normal" students are absorbing social science facts, cultural information, scientific knowledge, and information processed about themselves through reading fiction, EMR's are still struggling learning to read and to do elementary math. Therefore, I believe that educators have the reponsibility for helping to fill this void by giving them the opportunity to learn by finding ways that suit their learning modes. I try to do this by using actual situations as bases for learning. When I drive a group to the public health clinic for work permit physicals, we discuss the training each one is going to enter. Usually a discussion begins among the group, and I take part in drawing out what they think the job will be like, whether they have known people who have had similar jobs, where they will go for the job, how they will get there, what they will wear, and similar knowledge. When we enter the car, elevator and buildings, I teach them the courtesies, telling them that they will get along better at work if they observe them. The students understand the concept of competition, and I use this to help in motivating them to proper behavior. I tell them that we are a team representing the school and that when our students are courteous, it adds a score for our school and makes it easier for us to find jobs.

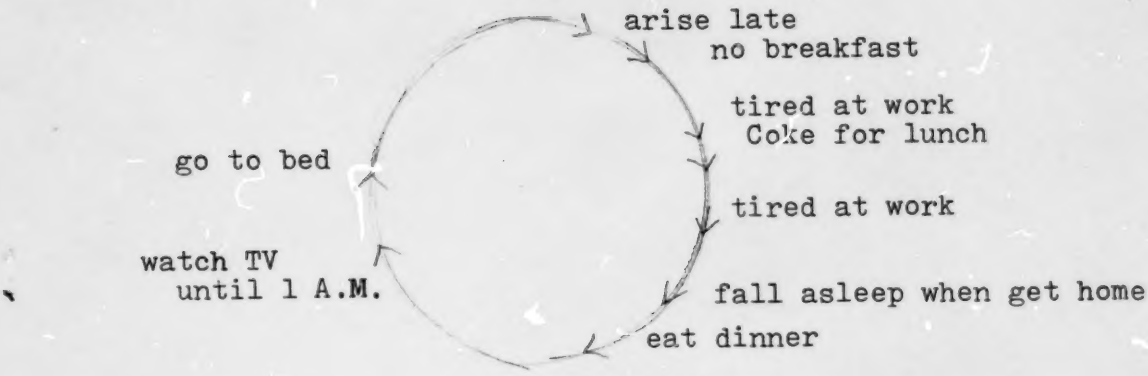
When they enter work training, they become part of a counseling group which meets the week they are in school. Small groups give each student a chance to be recognized as a person with unique needs. Groups offer satisfying experiences in providing a sense

of belonging.Close personal relationships can develop, and students can feel free to talk without being ridiculed. We discuss such topics as: What do you like best about your job? What do you like least? What is your boss like? Who are your favorite co-workers and what makes you like them? What happens if you are late? They also are given tasks to do for the next group session such as asking a worker how long he has been on the job, how he trained for the job, what he would like to do if he didn't have this job. We discuss other questions: What would you like to see changed at work to make it a better place to work? What could you do differently to help do a better job? What are some safety hazards on the job? What could be done to eliminate these? Communication skills are lacking in many of the students and any furthering of these skills is of importance. Structured activities that foster open communication and self-understanding such as collage autobiographies are useful.

In counseling individually with students concerning problems, I use techniques that make the problem and its solution graphic. I draw a picture of the student and the other people involved in the problem. I keep sketching as we talk. Many times the solution to the problem lies in ignoring other people, and I draw the student sticking to his job, paying no attention to others who are acting improperly, and I then portray the student reaching the goal of finishing his training, getting good evaluations, and a letter of recommendation while the troublemaker is sketched as losing his job. I also use some techniques derived from direct psychotherapy methods. One that is especially effective is that of Harry H. Garnder. It is called "confrontation problem solving." It involves making a statement and then asking how the student thinks or feels about the

statement. For example, I said to one student, "Barbara, I do not want you to stay home from school or work to run errands for your mother What do you think or feel about what I just said?" I could hardly believe the fullness of her response. This usually quiet girl said, "Mrs. Gardner, I know what you mean. I can't stay home to do errands now that I have a job because when you have a job, you have to be sick in order to stay home. I'll tell my mother I have to do errands for her after school or after work." Barbara completed her training and although she did stay home occasionally, she received a good evaluation from her employer.

Another counseling technique is similar to the one used in assertion therapy. This is the use of assignments in interpersoanl relationships on the job. One young lady was thought by her supervisor to be arrogant because she turned her head away when addressed. It was a habit she had which may have developed from lack of confidence. I explained the feelings she aroused in others by her action and told her to consciously look directly in the eyes of anyone who spoke to her and keep a record of each time she forgot. It took on the aspect of a game to her, and the next time she was evaluated, her employer indicated a great improvement. Another helpful technique is derived from the therapy of E. Lakin Phillips. This is the use of the assertion structured loop. In this therapy, a problem is solved theough finding antecedent behavior that can be altered to eliminate a problem. In the case of Larry, his employer complained of his being tired at work: In discussing this with Larry, I structured the following loop:



The important element here is the elimination of tiredness at work. According to Lakin, it is best to enter the loop nearest the point of desired change and also alter other elements as necessary to accomplish desired behavior. The loop is of value in working with EMR's and their parents because it makes graphic the behavior involved. In this loop, I decided to enter in two places: the "late TV" and the "no breakfast." I talked with Larry and his mother stressing the importance of early retiring and eating an adequate breakfast. Again, I used the sketch of the student, picturing the goal he wanted - a job in the future. As a result of this, in about a month, Larry was not only eating breakfast and was not tired at work but had started eating lunch with a friend he had made at work. Instead of watching TV until late, he watched a few favorite programs and went to bed at 10:30.

The reality therapy of William Glasser is another useful technique. The basic concept is that individuals need a feeling of self-worth and a feeling that they are worthwhile to others. Many EMR's are in need of help in attaining this feeling of self-worth as they are aware that they have handicaps. I try to build a close relationship with each of my students, and I treat them with dignity and respect. I have the personal feeling that almost every person

in the world can learn to do something to help support himself and that he has some likable quality that can be found and built upon. Another aspect of reality therapy is that of taking personal responsibility for one's life, and the various counseling techniques build toward this.

Our students receive certificates of completion when they leave our Center-usually about the age of 17 or 18. We encourage them to attend adult basic education classes in the evening after they leave us. We encourage our students to return for counseling, and many do. I work just as closely with those who have left us as I do with those who are in school. Over the years I have established strong contacts with the Employment Commission and Chamber of Commerce staffs. I am chairman of the Portsmouth Chanber of Commerce Education Committee. This gives me an opportunity to speak with employers about our students to familiarize them with their capabilities. I keep close watch daily on the newspaper employment advertisements, and former students, knowing this, call me to keep them informed if they do not subscribe to the paper. I encourage them to do this as it is a good way to follow up on students.

In summary, exceptional students have the same counseling needs as "normal" students, but their disabilities create special needs of which educators must be aware. The counselor has a special function to help the EMR find his competencies and to help him move toward developing his full potential. He must first of all be a warm person in order to establish good human relationships. He should also reach into the community to help spread the idea that EMR's can become productive citizens.

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